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The RFD "Definitive 5"

By Mark Kemp

In January, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame announced its “Definitive 200” campaign—a list of albums the organization’s team of deciders says everyone should own.

Such lists are nothing new, of course. Rolling Stone, which is affiliated with the Hall, puts out list issues regularly. When I was editor, we compiled the “Rolling Stone 200: The Essential Rock Collection”; the magazine has since expanded it to the “500 Greatest Albums of All Time.” MTV airs list shows on each of its channels, from VH1’s “100 Greatest One Hit Wonders” to CMT’s “20 Greatest Southern Rock Songs” (which I appeared on). Last year, Spin issued the hipper “100 Greatest Albums, 1985-2000.” And everybody does year-end lists; last month, Harp checked in with its “Top 50 Albums of 2006.”

The problem with these lists is that the criteria for choosing are suspect. There’s no scientific method for deciding what makes an “essential” album. My Café Tacuba would be canceled out by my girlfriend’s Juan Gabriel. But my girlfriend is a mere music fan; I’m an “expert.” (Yeah, right.)

We critics tend to treat this stuff like rocket science. But what ends up happening in the incestuous rockcrit world—just as with any insular world—is that you have leaders and sheep-like followers. For instance, if Robert Christgau, self-proclaimed Dean of American Rock Critics and former overseer of the Village Voice’s Pazz & Jop Poll, anoints Northern State the next Beastie Boys, his critical clique follows suit. Even if nobody else in the world has ever heard of Northern State. (Have you?)

Then there are the folks who have power but questionable taste—Rolling Stone head honcho Jann Wenner, for example. These folks put their friends on their lists. You’ll never see a Rolling Stone “greatest” issue without non-greats like Billy Joel or Jimmy Buffett in them. I remember reminding my young, hip staff at Rolling Stone that Jann had insisted on having Billy Joel in the “Rolling Stone 200.” Jann didn’t care which Joel album we picked, as long as the Piano Man was there.

Now, anybody with a clue knows Billy Joel shouldn’t be on a serious list of essential albums. Or shouldn’t he? If I had Jann Wenner’s power, I’d want Lynyrd Skynyrd and los Aterciopelados on the list, and many of you would roll your eyes—at least, at Skynyrd. My hope is that I wouldn’t make such a demand; that instead, all the bright young critics in my world would realize, on their own, how great Skynyrd’s Second Helping really is. Truth is, I don’t know what I’d do if I had Jann’s power.

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The reason everybody gets in on the list action is obvious: ratings and circulation. Lists draw people in. We all love to make our own lists and we love to argue about other peoples' cluelessness. And lists are helpful. Like reviews, they provide quick and easy, cut-out-and-paste-on-the-fridge consumer guides. But doesn't this take away from the process of discovery? The danger is, rather than search for our own interesting music, we check off the discs on the RS 200 and wind up with a shitty Billy Joel album when we might rather have something by Andrea Echeverri. Reviews are different. We read them because we enjoy reading, and then we explore further. It's more intellectually challenging.

However, in the spirit of offering even more confusion, here's my rebuttal to last issue's Harp Top 50 of '06. (Hey, this is my power move. You'd do it, too!) When I scanned that list, I saw the same-old, same-old: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Tom Waits, Sonic Youth, Yo La Tengo—all great artists. But even many of the younger acts—Drive By Truckers, Beck, Belle & Sebastian, Neko Case, Sparklehorse—were names that have long been stamped Rockcrit Certified.

It's not that I don't agree with much of what was on the list, I just get annoyed when everybody files the requisite names and then basks snugly in his or her hip comfort zone. So let me nudge you out of your comfort zone with five discs that didn't make the Harp Top 50 largely because they weren't Rockcrit Certified:

1) Aterciopelados, *Oye* (NACIONAL): Colombian punk-turned-eclectic art-rock band led by singer/songwriter Andrea Echeverri and her adventurous partner, bassist/composer Héctor Buitrago. On two standout tracks (with lyrics in Spanish), the group cites protest-singing forebears from John Lennon to Manu Chao, and criticizes women singers who use sex to sell themselves and their music.

2) Cordero, *En Este Momento* (BLOODSHOT): Brooklyn-based indie-rock en español band led by Ani Cordero, a drummer and singer who's worked with Giant Sand and members of surf revivalists Man or Astro-Man?. Momento mixes trad-Latin instrumentation and a strong political awareness (in its bilingual lyrics) with a raw indie sensibility.

3) Dixie Chicks, *Taking the Long Road* (COLUMBIA): You know the group and you know the saga. Well, they're still mad as hell and they ain't backing down. On this road, America's boldest, most uncompromising mainstream pop/rock/country band delivers its most brutally honest set of songs since Home, but without the gentle extended hand to those who don't get honesty.

4) Roman Candle, *The Wee Hours Revue* (V2): Why was this excellent Chapel Hill, NC, band passed over by so many best-ofs? In June, they put out one of the sharpest roots-rock albums of the decade and since then… silence.

5) Tom Zé, *Estudando o Pagode* (LUAKA BOP): Like the late Phil Ochs, this pioneer of Tropicalia—the '60s-born Brazilian equivalent of '60s American protest music (sung in Portuguese, of course)—refers to himself as a "musical journalist." Last year, at 70(!), Zé released his most ambitious work to date, which is saying a lot for this kindred spirit of both Caetano Veloso and Capt. Beefheart. As always, Zé mixes his gritty acoustic guitar and

vocals with found instruments, herky-jerky melodies and a biting sense of humor and social justice.

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